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ABSTRACT

The Oral Communication Program at Radford University (Virginia) is designed to: (1) provide programming, facilities, and professional expertise to help students and faculty improve oral communication skills; and (2) support and facilitate the incorporation of oral communication into the undergraduate curriculum throughout the university, using the Writing Across the Curriculum program as a model. The program is composed of six elements: an information exchange forum, oral presentation program, communication apprehension program, listening program, small group communication program, and the communication laboratory. This paper offers a discussion of the need for such programs in higher education, a description of program implementation, and an evaluation of the program's success. (Eight references.) (JDD)

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AN ORAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAM: GOALS AND IMPLEMENTATION

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The Oral Communication Program (OCP) at Radford University is nearing the end of its first year of operation. The program is designed to serve a two fold purpose. The first is to provide programming, facilities and professional expertise to help students and faculty improve oral communication skills. The second purpose is to support and facilitate the incorporation of oral communication into the undergraduate curriculum throughout the university, using the Writing Across the Curriculum program as a model.

This paper is designed to describe the OCP as it has been implemented at Radford and to provide an evaluation of its first year of operation which will assist those who may wish to design similar programs at other institutions. The following three sections develop this theme.

1. A discussion of the need for such programs in higher education.
2. A description of the implementation of this particular program.
3. An evaluation of the success of the program thus far and a discussion of the problems encountered in its' implementation.

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THE NEED FOR ORAL COMMUNICATION TRAINING

Communication professionals have long been aware of the importance of communication training for students. After all, the fundamental axioms of our discipline reach back to Greek and Roman thinkers who extolled the virtue of rhetoric as a means of determining truth, resolving conflicts, swaying the public, training the leader, etc. Inherent to that history--whether the tradition be Greek, Roman, Medieval, or contemporary--is the fundamental assumption that communication education is one of the central building blocks of any educational experience. So, it comes as no surprise that professionals in our field have long recognized the importance of communication education and lionized its virtues in print.

What is remarkable is the rather recent and voluminous recognition from various sectors that communication is not only an important element in the liberal education of the individual, but that communication is also essential to professional and personal success as well. What seems to have occurred is the recognition that not only was Barker (1980) correct in his estimate of the amount of time individuals spend communicating during their waking hours (80%), but additionally that the proficiency with which this block of time is used has an important influence on the success of businesses, careers, education, personal affairs, etc.

Business and organizations have been particularly taken with the notion that communication is an important aspect of business life. Perhaps this recognition comes as a result of the intense competitiveness of Japan in world markets and a corresponding

interest in how they do things. Whatever the origin of this new awareness businesses and organizations of all types have placed new and renewed emphasis on communication training and education. In the state of Virginia, for example The Commission on the University of the 21st Century recently published a report entitled "Business and Education" (1989). J. Carter Fox, chief executive officer and president of Chesapeake Corporation and chair of the Virginia Business Council, is quoted in that publication as saying that "We've found that many of the people we hire today have good technical skills and excellent ideas, but are unable to communicate well with customers, suppliers, and fellow employees." Fox goes on to say that the basics of any sound business education must include a strong emphasis on communication basics, i.e., speaking, writing, and listening.

One doesn't have to look far for additional support. Professional publications have for some time reported numerous surveys which identify communication effectiveness as a key skills that employees must possess (for example, DiSalvo 1980; Williams 1978; Hafer and Hoth 1983, Kanter, 1983). In fact, many writers have come to conceptualize organizations as communication systems. As such the quality of communication impacts directly on the effectiveness of the organization. As Conrad (1985) notes,

> "One of the most important recent developments in the way people look at organizations has been the increasing amount of attention paid to different aspects of communication. Managers and researchers alike have recognized that businesses must maintain at least an adequate level of communication in order to survive, that increasing the effectiveness of communication within a firm contributes to the efficiency of its operation, and that in some cases highly effective

communication can increase productivity and eventually profitability."

The result of this discussion is not new or surprising for communication professionals. There has for some time been a recognition that communication education is a critical element in the education of the individual and that communication is now a recognized element in organizational and individual success. This discussion does, however, serve to provide a context for the creation of the Oral Communication Program and the goals and objectives that it has sought to achieve. The next section takes this context as a given and then describes the current structure of the program at Radford University. The final section evaluates that program after approximately one year of service.

THE ORAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

Radford University's newly established Oral Communication Program seeks to meet the demands for communication training discussed above through a combination of programs designed for students and faculty and the development of innovative instructional materials and programmatic offerings. This section begins by describing the broad outlines of the Oral Communication Program and then discusses six specific phases of the project.

The Overall Program

The Oral Communication program was initiated through a $172,000 Funds for Excellence grant from The State Council on Higher Education. That grant was originally conceptualized by Dr. Phil Glenn and Dr. Michael Cronin in response to the issues raised

in the previous section. The grant was awarded for the 1988-90 biennium and is the largest of its kind for that biennium. The University has provided over $200,000 in additional support.

Two primary objectives characterize the general nature of the program:

1. The program seeks to provide communication education and training for students, faculty and staff.
2. The program seeks to develop communication intensive courses across campus via the Writing Across the Curriculum model.

Specific Offerings

More specifically, the Oral Communication Program is composed of the following six elements: Information-exchange forum, oral presentation program, communication apprehension program, listening program, small group communication program, and the communication laboratory. This section elaborates on the structure and function of each of these elements.

1. <u>The Information-Exchange Forum</u>. This program serves as a forum for a dialogue about the application of oral communication techniques, experiences, and activities in the classroom. The program is intended to stimulate research, experimentation, assessment of results, debate and discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of using various oral communication techniques as

well as the methodology for their application.

Principal activities of this aspect of the program included two informational meetings held during the fall semester of 1989. These meetings were attended by forty members of the general faculty. The meetings focused attention both on the importance of communication education generally and the need for including communication experiences and activities in the classroom.

The first, entitled "Debating to Learn: Uses of Debate as a Classroom Teaching Tool", resulted from a project in which an OCP consultant assisted a Marketing faculty member in using debate both as an opportunity to develop communication skills and as a mechanism for mastering course content. The program elaborated on this experience and suggest creative means of incorporating communication as an integral part of the learning experience.

In April 1989, eighteen faculty members participated in a weekend retreat which focused on "Oral Presentations in the Classroom." Participants considered ways to design speech assignments in a variety of courses in the university curriculum. They considered ways to assist students in preparing such assignments and how those projects could be evaluated. Faculty members also prepared and presented their own speeches as a means of reflect on their personal skill as communicators. Plans are to repeat this activity in the Fall of 1989.

This particular aspect of the program has been particularly successful. To date, eleven faculty from nine departments across campus have selected to make their courses "communication intensive." This aspect of the program requires communication

faculty to serve as consultants who work closely with faculty to develop, present, and evaluate communication activities. For the fall 1989 semester 17 instructors have expressed an interest in participating in this program.

The information exchange forum also produced a newsletter which was issued in the Fall of 1988 and the Spring of 1989. This was a general information letter distributed throughout the university which offered tips and ideas about using communication activity as a teaching tool.

2. The Oral Presentation Program. This program provides faculty and students with information and training in oral presentation skills. The specific services provided include instruction in audience analysis and adaptation, development of supporting materials, effective organization, the use of outlines, the use of visual support, and effective delivery. In addition, instructional materials designed to assist in this mission are being developed which incorporate print, video, and computer-assisted media.

A new course, scheduled to begin in fall 1989, entitled "Communication Skills Tutoring" will offer upper-level undergraduates and graduates the opportunity to work as consultants in communication intensive courses. This course provides opportunities for communication graduate and undergraduate students to develop and apply communication principles as consultants.

As this aspect of the program develops, students will be able to work with various instructional media, video equipment, and student consultants in OCP facilities. Individual and group instruction will be available in various areas of communication

skill development. For example, a student who has been assigned a presentation as a part of a communication intensive course will be able to come to OCP facilities for individual instruction regarding the assignment and communication skill development in general. The student will be able to work through self-paced instructional materials regarding various aspects of speaking, listening, group participation as a means of building background knowledge. That student will then be able to develop practical skills through video tape and interaction with student and faculty consultants.

3. The Desensitization Program: A major problem facing communicators is anxiety about speaking. There are a number of specific techniques available for the management of this problem. During the spring 1989 semester the PRCA-24 scale was administered to students in the 23 sections of the basic public speaking course. Those scoring in the upper decile on the overall test or on the public speaking component were given the opportunity to participate in a systematic desensitization program. Overall, thirty-one students participated in the program, meeting in groups of five to seven.

During the 1989-90 academic year the program will be expanded with student assistants trained as facilitators. A problem with the program so far is that it only addresses public speaking anxiety. Plans include expanding this service to address communication apprehension in a variety of contexts.

4. The Listening Program. The program in listening offers assessment of listening skills and training in active listening behavior. While a number listening tests and instructional aids

have been assembled, assistance with this part of the communication process was the least requested by faculty and students. This is due to a lack of recognition of listening as a communication skill and to a low level of awareness about listening training in general. A necessary focus of the program in the future would seem to be one of education and consciousness raising.

5. The Small Group Communication Program. This program offers students training and education in principles and practices of communication in small groups. OCP staff assist in evaluating group performance and suggesting avenues for improvement.

Another important facet of this program is the development of materials focusing on group discussion as a mechanism for learning. The Oral Communication Program offers materials that assist faculty in using groups as a communication intensive learning technique. OCP also offers consulting for faculty who wish assistance in incorporating the group learning concept into course syllabi.

This program was rarely requested by faculty and students. Once again creating an awareness of the need for this kind of service will continue to be a primary focus of the program. Those faculty who did show interest this program seemed to interested in the uses of small groups in the classroom and in leading class discussions themselves. OCP plans include developing additional materials and providing seminars, workshops, and retreats in this area.

6. The Oral Communication Laboratory. The communication laboratory features videotaping facilities including a mini-cam unit that can be used in remote situations, monitors, and rooms for viewing and

observation.

Eventually the lab will contain an instructor's station with individual consoles, each equipped with an audio recording and playback unit. Additional stations will house both a computer terminal and audio and video playback units.

This facility allows for the taping and review of individual and group presentations as well as classroom presentations and other activities. For example, the mini-cam was used during the spring 1989 semester to tape student teachers in physical education at the elementary level. The student teachers were taped during activities on the play-ground as well as in the classroom and were then able to review their work either privately or with the instructor.

Services of the Communication Laboratory will expand as additional equipment becomes available and as faculty and students become aware of its existence.

EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

The Oral Communication Program at Radford University is an exciting innovation that reflects the recognition that communication is an essential skill in every aspect of life. The first year has been an exciting one as new programs have been created and implemented. However, in many respects it is still too early to determine if the Oral Communication Program has been a success. Many programs have been in operation for only one semester while others are still in the development stage.

Given the newness of this program it is still possible to report that the program has met basic goals in terms of its

commitment to communication education and training. The most difficult aspect of this project, however, has been making its existence a visible aspect of campus life and gaining acceptance of its services. That, of course, is a continuing project which must continue into the 1989-90 academic year.

Those contemplating the development of similar programs must be aware of this situation and realize that a critical step in the success of any similar program is dependent on education and awareness. Many faculty take communication skill, particularly oral communication skill, as a given. They must be made aware that oral communication is a central aspect of education and that it is a teachable skill not just a talent possessed by some and not by others. Until that awareness is achieved, programs such as this one will go largely under-utilized.

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